

Wind River High Route

Section 1: Green River Lakes Trailhead to Upper Indian Basin

The hike starts with the gentlest of introductions. A mellow wander up the flat and scenic drainage of the Green River for the first few hours, with excellent views of Squaretop Mountain. From the Green River Lakes trailhead, take the trail that heads along the eastern shore of the two turquoise colored Green River Lakes. This trail is marked as both the Highline Trail and the Continental Divide Trail. After passing the two lakes, the trail begins a very gradual climb toward Three Forks Park, which is reached after several hours of hiking. At Three Forks Park the trail turns abruptly west and you begin your ascent into the high country, climbing to just above 10000 feet and over Vista Pass. A slight drop and then a climb into a rocky basin towards Cube Rock Pass will bring you above 10000 feet once again. The High Route will stay above 10000 feet for the next 5 or 6 days, not dropping below this barrier until the final hike out to the car, just a few miles from the Big Sandy Trailhead.

From Cube Rock Pass continue on the trail toward Peak Lake. There is decent camping on the west side of Peak Lake, but even better camping in the basin just east of the lake. From the outlet of Peak Lake, curve around its north shore, passing through a large talus slide that drops all the way to the shore. Then wander east toward Knapsack Col. Use trails can be found sporadically along parts of this valley. As you near the Col, look for use trails that descend directly down from the pass. High on the south side of the basin as you approach the pass is the Stroud Glacier. This glacier is commonly identified as the source of one of the largest rivers in the western United States, the Green River. The river drops north out of the Wind River range, then turns south and winds its way through Wyoming and Utah, traversing some of the finest canyons in the world. Eventually it merges with the Colorado River in Canyonlands National Park, before heading onward through the Grand Canyon and down to Mexico.

From Knapsack Col (about 12200 feet) you are treated to one of the finest views on the entire Wind River High Route. The alpine cirque at the head of Titcomb Basin becomes suddenly visible to the east, while the view to the west reveals the far off ranges of western Wyoming.

The east side of Knapsack Col holds far more snow than the west side, and in most years the descent down the east side will require crossing moderate snow slopes. On our recent hike in the late summer of 2013, we were able to descend directly down the east side, crossing only a few small snow and ice patches. Leaving the pass going east, if you see snow below head off to the left, avoiding the steep slope directly below the pass. Continue down and left across talus and then head back to the right as you near the bottom of the initial headwall about 250 vertical feet below the pass.

Descend the obvious drainage just north of the Twins Glacier, dropping over its terminal moraine to the bottom of the Titcomb Basin. Turn south toward the highest of the Titcomb Lakes, where you will join a trail that traverses their eastern shore. Easy hiking along this trail will take you in a couple of hours to the junction with the Indian Pass trail. Turn east at this junction and climb up into beautiful alpine terrain in Indian Basin, where there is excellent camping and good views of the southwest slopes of massive Fremont Peak. At 11500 feet you will encounter a flat basin holding the last small lakes before Indian Pass. There is good camping here just below the final climb to Indian Pass.

Section 2: Indian Pass to Golden Lake

The route from Indian Pass to Camp Lake is the highlight of the trip. It passes through the most rugged and impressive terrain of our Wind River High Route. It traverses across the massive Knife Point Glacier, the southernmost glacier in of a chain of glaciers on the east side of the Divide extending all the way from Gannet Peak (WY highpoint) and the enormous Dinwoody Glaciers that surround the peak.

This section also contains the most challenging navigation of the trip and the only class 3/4 terrain (although it may be possible with a bit of extra trekking and scouting to avoid anything over class 2). This entire section may be avoided with an alternate off-trail route*.

Starting from the small lakes at the end of Indian Basin ascend a use trail east towards Indian Pass. We lost the trail a few times but the pass is obvious. The view from the pass is stunning. Rugged and seldom visited canyons of the eastern range spread out before you. To the north extends crest of the continental divide with a chain of glaciers flanking its eastern slope. This is an excellent spot for lunch or a snack break. Looking east you can see the obvious saddle of Alpine Lakes Pass above the easternmost extension of Knifepoint Glacier.

To gain access to the flatter and more walkable portion of Knife Point Glacier, descend NNE from the Pass and along the right base of the 11,840 promontory just west of "Point" on the map. Some of the talus dropping down to the glacier is a bit unstable. Actually much of the talus adjacent to the glacier is unstable due to climate change. This talus was until very recently part of the glacier and covered with ice. Since being exposed it has not had time to adequately settle, lock-up and become the usual more stable version of talus. So, beware of your footing on any talus near the glacier.

Once on the glacier, traverse SE on the flatter area of the glacier between the 11,720 and 11,600 contours to stay above the steeper terminal slope. (By August on our trip the glacier had receded to around 11,560-11,520). The goal is to attain a lower angle rock strewn ramp of the glacier at around 11,660, NE of 'G' of Glacier. We descended off the glacier at this point using the rocks for traction. Head NE across a talus field (quite unstable in sections) to the base of Alpine Col. The only place to camp in this area are two man-cleared bivy sites as noted on the map and in the waypoints table. Bivy sacks only. Do not expect to pitch a tarp or tent here. There is small lakelet with good water.

We were able to safely cross the glacier using trail running shoes and trekking poles. We crossed late on a sunny day when the surface of the glacier had softened. Depending on one's comfort level crossing glacial ice, or in snowier and/or colder earlier season conditions, it may be prudent to use crampons and ice axe both here and for the subsequent Alpine Lakes Pass.

The ascent of the north side of Alpine Lakes Pass is straightforward. Good views from the top show the talus strewn, cliffy and deeply glacier-scoured valley that holds the brilliant gems of the Alpine Lakes. Be prepared for slow going in the Alpine Lakes Basin. It is filled with large and plentiful talus and the hiking involves negotiating around cliffs that drop directly into lakes. Other route challenges will make for tedious progress in sections.

The descent of the south side of Alpine Lakes Pass has a steep and permanent snowfield. By August it was significantly melted out on our trip. We were able to skirt the NE edge of the

snowfield and stay on rock and talus. In a higher snow year, or earlier in the season one might be forced to descend on at least part of the snowfield. This might well require crampons and an ice axe to safely descend. The snowfield is steep.

Pass Lake 11,335 along the west shore staying above the shore initially along talus filled ridges. The cliffs about 2/3 of the way along the shore appear impassable but “go.” Not visible from a distance is a short class 3 ramp system (climb up and down) near the lakeshore that allows passage to a flatter section near the outlet.

Mostly easy walking takes you down to the middle Alpine Lake (Lake 10,988), where you will have a pleasant stroll along its west side and down more talus to Lake 10,895. Here you will face a decision. We passed Lake 10,895 on the north side. It is plain sailing along the shore until you are almost to the outlet where 50-100 feet of cliffs ruin the party. We climbed a class 3/4 crack system above a stand of white pines (handing packs up in a few places) for approximately 75 feet to gain flatter ground above the cliffs. We then descended gentle ramps to the outlet. Views from outlet of this lake are stupendous. It would make an excellent lunch spot or campsite. Your alternative route would travel around and along the south shore of Lake 10,895. While longer and more time consuming, this would probably be a class 2 route to the outlet.

From the furthest east projection of Lake 10,895 we headed ESE and dropped into a shallow drainage that feeds an unnamed lake adjacent and south of Lake 10,239. Use ramps and gullies to make your way between cliff bands and steeper rock on the approach to the lake. There is a use trail from this unnamed lake to Camp Lake although it is easy to lose. The marked trail from Camp Lake to Lake 10,787 is not frequently traveled and is no more than a use trail in sections. We lost it a few times but easily re-found it. The route to Lake 10,787 is obvious, but the trail when you can find it is faster and is less effort. The trail from Lake 10,787 to Golden Lake is more established. For the most part it is easy to follow although it can braid into multiple trails around the Golden lakes.

* Section 2 can be bypassed by skipping Indian Basin and heading to Island Lake and then to Wall Lake and over the divide east of Tiny Glacier and down to Upper Golden Trout Lake. Another variant would head south from Wall Lake to Dennis Lake via Angel Pass. Caveat Emptor: Neither of us have traveled either of these alternate routes but have been told by two experienced Wind River hikers and climbers that they “work without serious difficulty.”

Section 3: Golden Lake to Lee Lake

At the southern tip of Golden Lake a small inlet stream is the last good water source before Hay Pass. We ate dinner here on the shady, cool gravel next to the lake. A bald eagle soared over the water that evening, scouring for trout. Ascend the trail to shallow and picturesque Hay Pass, crossing to the west side of the continental divide. From the pass, a trail descends gradually to the west, passing along the eastern side of Lake 10,756. At about 10,600 feet leave the trail and head toward the obvious basin to the southeast. After arriving at the first major lake in this basin, continue along a very flat and grassy (and frequently boggy) valley floor toward the southwest shore of Lake 10,555. We found a poor campsite in the low pines along this shore. Camp somewhere else if your schedule allows. The warm water from this lake tasted distinctly unpleasant and tannic.

The basin will likely continue to be and boggy wet until you begin to rise toward a low pass before Lake 10,683 (sometimes called Long Lake). Hike along the eastern shore of this remote lake. The going gets rougher as you get near the west end of the lake, where you negotiate a few ramps and plenty of talus without significant difficulty. Continue over a small rise and drop into isolated Europe Canyon. Here you will join a trail and head southwest for a short while (probably less than a half mile, depending on where you merge with the trail) until you can cut directly to the eastern shore of Lake 10,542. This easily passible shoreline takes the most direct line to a slope on the far side of the lake. Climb about 300 feet over a small pass, and along the north side of Lake 10,806.

Now begins an intricate traverse toward the outlet stream on the southwest side of enormous Hall's Lake. Expect plenty of zig zagging through brush and trees, and many small drops, climbs, bogs, and lakelets. Finally arriving at Hall's Lake, turn to the south and pass a couple of small lakes. Continue to the south around Peak 11586. As you pass this peak, head east toward your next landmark, the outlet of Middle Fork Lake. This section is marked by beautiful and pleasant walking past many small ponds filled with plenty of big fish.

At Middle Fork Lake, you will join a good trail that runs along its north shore. Hike along this trail until it gradually becomes more difficult to follow as you near the far end of the lake. From the southeast end of Middle Fork Lake, continue south up the beautiful valley, with Pronghorn Peak towering over the upper right side of the valley and Nylon Peak on the left side. Soon you will come to the northern end of Lee Lake, a great place to camp or rest before the climb ahead.

Section 4: Lee Lake to Texas Lake via Bonneville Lakes, Pyramid Lake, & Washakie Creek

Near the southern end of Lee Lake ascend towards the base of the shallow ridge protruding from the E shore of Lake Donna. Acquire this ridge (also the right rim of the small glacier basin) and ascend to Lake Donna. Pause to appreciate towering and seemingly overhanging face of Pronghorn Peak as it plunges down to the western shore of Lake Donna. Then head SSE to the obvious saddle between peaks 11,865 and 11,925. Drop down a ramp system between cliffs to Lake 10,828 (it may take a bit of route finding to get something that works). Go around the west side of the lake. The route from the outlet down to Lake 10,521 is not obvious. Follow the outlet stream on the SE side and stay left of the outlet stream (south east) along the top of the steep face looking for an obvious use trail. It may be easier to see the use trail farther below and trace it back up to its origin. There is good camping on the south shore of Lake 10,521. The lake is full of willing Brookies, some of decent size, but no Cutt's that we could find.

Your next goal is the pass between Mt. Bonneville and Raid Peak. From Lake 10,521 do not ascend directly up the steep and heinous route up the lake's inlet stream on the SE corner of the lake. Instead, follow a lower gradient route SW of the inlet stream. Don't turn left and up into the shallower portion of the inlet stream drainage basin until you have reached flatter terrain (just above the red '2' on the map). The ascent to the pass is straightforward. To confuse things, there are numerous use and game trails that appear and disappear without reason. There is a long stretch of size Large to XL talus as you descend the east side of the pass and make your way to small lake directly east and above Lake 10,566. To avoid the steep terrain north of Lake 10,566, head east or southeast towards the prominent south-pointing nose of the 11,000 ft contour. Use a small ramp system just southeast of the nose to reach flatter terrain below 11,000 feet. The outlet of the small lake makes an excellent rest stop with good water and superb views.

From the lake take a leisurely stroll along the excellent bench that contours at 10,800 ft. Hang a left for Pyramid Lake around the south shore of a small lake north of peak 11,172. Go to the lake's outlet to pick up a well-used trail. [Alternatively you can stay off trail for a bit longer. Drop down to Lake 10,566 and follow the East Fork River and pick up the same trail (from Pyramid Lake) further down at Skull Lake.]

The route from here is straightforward trail walking to Texas Lake. Hike the trail from Pyramid Lake to Washakie Creek. Cross to the south side of the creek and head upstream (east) towards Shadow Lake. Here there are superb views of the backside of the ridge forming the Cirque of the towers. It is an excellent spot for lunch.

Follow a use trail (we lost it a few times) to the small lake below Texas Pass (the pass between peak 11,925 and peak 12,537). This lake is locally known as Texas Lake. There is excellent camping in the meadow on the west side of the lake.

A long and violent afternoon T-storm with wind, hail and sleet forced us to hunker down in the late afternoon on the shores of Texas Lake. We waited out periods of sleet sliding in large sheets off of our Cuben Tarp (our only shelter for the trip). By dusk the storm had not sufficiently cleared. We gave up on our plans to camp in the Cirque of the Towers and settled down for the night. There are much worse places to camp!

Section 5: Texas Pass and Cirque of the Towers to Big Sandy Campground

The trip over Texas Pass and into the Cirque of the Towers is second in splendor only to the Indian Pass to Camp Lake Section. Needless to say the Cirque is legendary for both its stunning beauty and as hallowed ground for some of the best alpine rock climbing in North America. It should be on every backpacker's bucket list.

While there is no official trail over Texas Pass the use trail was in better condition and easier to follow than some of the official "trails" we traveled in less visited portions of the Range—it's a veritable "use-trail freeway." The trail starts from the SE corner of Texas Lake and ascends on mostly solid ground between scree and talus. The views are sublime as you descend from the pass into the Cirque and Lonesome Lake. A quintessential "Sound of Music walk."

From Texas Pass the use trail loosely follows the NE branch of the inlet stream for Lonesome Lake, passing through a stand of pines around 10,400 before reaching the grassy lakeside. We had a cup of morning coffee on the lakeshore while watching climbers ascend Pingora. Alan got his rod out, selected a beautiful native cutthroat trout, landed it and gently put it back. Sated with the beauty and serenity of the Cirque, we felt it was time to leave.

If you plan to stay the night in the Cirque: There is excellent camping in the basin below Pylon Peaks and Warrior Peaks.

We traversed off-trail around the eastern side of Lonesome Lake and acquired the official trail to Jackass pass around 10,400 ft. The route out to Big Sandy Campground from Jackass pass is a major trail with tons of traffic and the usual deeply eroded and braided trail sections. Nonetheless, Big Sandy Lake is a gem and a lunch or snack stop on its shores is a must. And on the final leg of the trip don't forget to look back now and then to appreciate the lovely Big Sandy Creek and the mountains behind.